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for Africa in 31-Foot Boat to Escape 'TV Scene'

Chris Harris for The New York Times

Matt Herron with, from left, Matthew 4th, Melissa and wife Jeannine aboard Aquarius in New Orleans on Saturday

Family Sails

By ROY REED
Special to The New York Times

NEW ORLEANS, July 19—A family of four left here yesterday in a 31-foot sailboat bound for Africa.

The voyagers expect to be at sea about a year and a half, except for brief port calls. As the father described the venture, their purpose is to stand away from America for a while and escape the pull of its television, materialism and what they have come to regard as its overpowering sense of spectatorship.

The voyagers are Matt Herron, 39 years old, a photographer; his wife, Jeannine, 33, and their children, Matthew 4th, 12, and Melissa, 10. They have lived in New Orleans several years and will make their home in California when they return.

"We're doing this mainly because of the kids," Mr. Herron said as he drank champagne with friends who had come to see them off from the dock of the Southern Yacht Club on Lake Pontchartrain. "We see this as pulling them out of the television-spectator scene."

He watched as his husky, freckle-faced son rigged a jib sail on the boat, which they have named the Aquarius. The boy has proved himself capable of handling the boat alone, the father said.

Experienced Sailors

The four have gained considerable experience as sailors during the last two years. Mr. Herron also sailed quite a lot during his younger years

"As we become more materialistic," he said, "people participate less, and there is less striving against the environment. You have fewer experiences like fear, hunger, cold, and the feeling of coming through hardship and knowing you did it on your own.

"We see our kids growing up without this, and I sense that they don't feel as deeply as they should. I want to toughen my kids. I want them to be strong individuals."

The voyagers hope to reach Port Etienne, Mauritania, on the western coast of Africa sometime in October, barring interference from what they expect to be their chief worry, hurricanes. Tropical storms occur frequently in some of the waters they will be sailing this summer.

After working for a time on a number of writing and photo assignments in Africa, they intend to sail back across the Atlantic to Rio de Janeiro and from there up the eastern coast of South America toward home.

Their route to Africa will take them from Lake Pontchartrain to the Gulf of Mexico, along the Gulf Coast to the tip of Florida, northeast to Bermuda, across the ocean to the Azores, southeast to the Canary Islands and then to the African coast.

Will Teach Children

Both parents have spent many years around universities—Mrs. Herron has just finished all the work, except a dissertation for a Ph. D. in neuroanatomy—and they will teach the children writing, mathematics and other academic skills on the boat.

They expect to keep a log on their feelings and experiences and turn it into a book.

In Bermuda, they will be joined for the rest of the Atlantic crossing by Phil Stiles, a young friend who has just finished a one-and-a-half-year Federal prison term for failing to notify his draft board of a change of address.

The Aquarius, a steel sloop built 10 years ago in Canada, is carrying 90 gallons of water, three radios, an auxiliary engine, a rather large supply of books (from "War and Peace" to "Typing Made Easy") and a food supply that Mr. Herron described as adequate for several months.

Much of the food is in cans that have been waxed to prevent rust.

Two or three dozen friends gathered on the dock to say good-by. It was cloudy and a breeze had risen. After the kisses, champagne and joking that alternated between the morbid and the sentimental, Mr. Herron pushed his rich black mustache into the shape of a grin, glanced at the crowd and said of the imminent setting of the sail, "I hope to God we do it in a seamanlike way."

A few minutes later the wind caught the sail and carried the boat out of the harbor and into the open lake. It was a little after 6 P.M.

The last part of the Aquarius that was visible was a string of 10 flags, one for each country the family expects to visit, all hand-made by Mr. Herron, who is, among other things, skilled at sewing.

October 22nd.

Dear friends of Jeannine

This letter was one of a bundle sent from Bermuda to mail here. They arrived 40 days later. I'phoned to Jeannine today. They are fine and love Horta. They will remain there until Nov. 10th. She had written to us on October, "Can you imagine coming into a beautiful place like this after 26 days at sea? It's like Paradise! Friendly people; hot water, clean sheets, and beds that don't jump around! It was an incredibly long voyage, but we made it. Three days becalmed; two storms (one with neat gale force) and headwinds most of the way." They crave mail. Address now is Poste Restante, Horta, Faial, Azores. Allow 10 days. After Nov. 20th. Poste Restante, Las Palmas, Gran Canary, Canary Islands.

Sincerely,

James Hull (Jeannine's father)